

Extra Feature Story

Report Says Many Youths Are 'Too Fat to Fight'

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A panel of retired military leaders has joined the fight against childhood obesity, saying that unhealthy school lunches are making America's youth unfit for military service and therefore pose a threat to national security. Their report, titled "Too Fat to Fight," states that 27 percent of all young adults are too overweight to serve in the armed forces.

According to the report, 75 percent of young people ages 17 to 24 are unfit to fight in the military because they didn't graduate from high school, have a criminal record or are not physically fit enough. Among these factors, lack of physical fitness keeps the most potential recruits from serving.

The Army physical fitness test requires that an 18-year-old male has to be able to do 42 push-ups in two minutes, 53 sit-ups in two minutes and run two miles in under 16 minutes.

Military lobbied for school lunch program in the past

The military has entered the debate over school lunches before, in the years following World War II. During the war, military leaders had to reject many recruits for the opposite reason: many of them had stunted growth and lacked proper nutrition. So, the military lobbied Congress for a way to make sure America's young people would grow up to become healthy adults.

The national school lunch program was established in 1946 by the 79th Congress through passage of the National School Lunch Act, which was signed into law by President Harry Truman, who called it a "measure of national security." The National School Lunch Act stipulated that the federal government would pay each state at least 75 percent of the money that its schools needed for food purchases, with adjustments depending on the average income level of each state's citizens.

Many amendments have since been made to the National School Lunch Act to improve and expand on it. The Child Nutrition Act of 1966 first established a school breakfast program, which has since expanded across the country, and the Special Milk Program was introduced to provide children with milk in schools.

Americans' eating habits have changed

In 2008, the National School Lunch Program provided low-cost or free lunches to more than 30.5 million children each school day, according to the USDA. School lunches have to adhere to the 1995 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which say that no more than 30 percent of an individual's calories should come from fat.

While the military and other interest groups say guidelines should be updated to make lunches more nutritious, students' eating habits outside of school are also affecting their obesity levels. The March issue of the journal *Health Affairs* says children in the U.S. snack almost three times a day on candy, chips and other nutritionless food on top of three meals a day.

Americans' caloric intakes have also increased dramatically in recent decades. The average American consumed 2,169 calories a day in 1970, but by 2008, Americans were consuming 2,674 calories daily - a 23 percent increase. A major source of extra calories is high fructose corn syrup, a sweetener and additive found in everything from soda to salad dressings.

Healthier lunches cost more

Making school lunches healthier may sound like a no-brainer, but it comes at a cost for American taxpayers.

The average free school lunch currently costs about \$2.92 to make, but the government only covers \$2.68 of that, according to the Associated Press. Fresh fruits and vegetables are among the most expensive foods on the market, and Congress will have to increase funding to schools in order to make such foods affordable for lunches.

The organization that sponsored the report, a group of retired military leaders called Mission: Readiness, traveled to Capitol Hill to encourage lawmakers to reauthorize a school nutrition program that would cut junk food and high-calorie beverages, improve menu quality, make more students eligible for free school meals and improve nutrition education.

The Obama administration has asked for \$1 billion a year in extra funding for school nutrition. A bill currently being considered in the Senate would add about half that much money, but the House has not yet considered any similar legislation.

- Compiled by Veronica DeVore for NewsHour Extra

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